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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 3552
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0115
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 2066
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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

Department for CA/OCS/ACS/EAP, White House for NSC Bader

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: VICTORIA BRACES FOR MORE FIRES

Ref: A) Melbourne 31, B) Melbourne 28, C) Melbourne 25, D) Melbourne 24, E) Melbourne 23, F) Melbourne 21, G) Melbourne 20, H) Melbourne 17, I) Canberra 134, J) Canberra 100

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Hot weather and high winds on February 27 threaten to spread the five major ongoing fires facing emergency personnel in Victoria. The state is taking precautionary measures by advising against unnecessary travel and closing schools. Charge visited the Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) where Victorian officials told him that a prolonged emergency of over 30-60 days may stretch the state too thin; the fires have been burning for 20 days. Charge also visited a U.S. wildfire team deployed to a fire affected area who warned that soil damage may have long lasting effects including a significant threat to Melbourne's water supply. Post has not received any reports of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the fires. End Summary.

A Tough Day Ahead

¶2. (SBU) Expected temperatures of 100+ degrees Fahrenheit and strong winds on February 27 have emergency officials preparing to confront additional fires in Victoria. Chief U.S. wildfire liaison Doug Alexander told post on February 27 that five major fires continue to burn throughout the state and high winds may threaten communities in the Yarra Valley, located only 35 miles northeast of Melbourne. While conditions may not be as severe as those on February 7, officials are concerned that lightning strikes and embers from existing fires may ignite new blazes. Emergency officials warned Victorians on February 26 to "avoid unnecessary travel" and closed 189 government schools as well as 221 children's services centers on February 27 in preparation for extreme fire weather. The number of dead from the February 7 fires has reached 210, as two people succumbed to their burns in a Melbourne hospital.

Charge's Visit with U.S. Personnel

¶3. (SBU) During a February 21 visit to Victoria's Emergency Coordination Center (ECC), Secretary of the Department of Sustainability and Environment Peter Harris, told Charge that the inter-agency coordination model in Australia is working "as well as it can." Harris noted, however, that the creation of a national fire coordination center would be a welcome development. Because the majority of Victoria's emergency coordination personnel are temporarily seconded to the effort from other departments, Harris believes that a prolonged fire of 30-60+ days may significantly

drain these other agencies. While Harris was unable to provide a precise cost estimate of Victoria's response to the fires, he believes that at least A\$200 million (US\$130 million) has been spent so far on salaries and equipment.

14. (SBU) Charge visited a fire affected area near Traralgon (located 87 miles southeast of Melbourne) and met with a U.S. burned area emergency response (BAER) team. The BAER personnel told Charge that one of the long term effects of the fires is that soil has been made temporarily water repellent, increasing the risk of flash floods as well as polluting downstream water catchments. Damaged soil, the BAER team said, can sometimes take three to four years to recover. The U.S. team told Charge that their Australian counterparts have shown a particular interest in soil imagery and U.S. personnel, in return, have learned best practices in documenting emergencies. Charge and Consul General attended a memorial ceremony on February 22 which featured speeches by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition Malcolm Turnbull, the Governor General and Princess Anne, representing Queen Elizabeth. Leaders promised to rebuild Victoria "brick by brick."

American Citizens

15. (SBU) Post has received no reports of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the fires. On February 24, we received notification that a UK/Portuguese national couple with three minor U.S. citizen children lost their home and personal effects in the February 7 fires. The children's U.S. passports were recovered, but their U.S. birth certificates and other important documents were lost. Post assisted the family in renewing the recovered, but expired

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passports. The family is staying in temporary accommodation and plans to return to the United States in March.

16. (SBU) This is the third report we have received of U.S. citizen families who have lost their homes in the February 7 fires; none of the families have requested consular financial assistance. The GOA is providing financial assistance to families affected by the fires, and an Australian/U.S. national requested help from post in obtaining more information about these funds. We have no outstanding welfare and whereabouts cases. Post will continue to report new developments to Consular Affairs.

Comment

17. (SBU) Although the fires have been burning now for nearly three weeks, emergency officials tell post that the fight is far from over. Expected extreme weather conditions on February 27 and March 3 may add a further burden on already exhausted fire fighters. U.S. wildfire personnel deployed to Australia tell us that cooperation with Australian counterparts has gone very well, and that the help has been warmly welcomed by an emergency service stretched thin by the fires.

THURSTON